



## Commentary on Bryan Palmer’s “Approaching working-class history as struggle: a Canadian contemplation; a Marxist meditation”

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Published online: 16 August 2018  
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One of the great challenges in commenting about Bryan Palmer’s eloquent forum statement is how best to follow it up with anything nearly as incisive. However, in both in its mission and critique, I am struck by how much Palmer’s review parallels and intersects with the challenges confronting scholars in my own sub-discipline of labor geography. As such, I will focus my comments on these common points while also emphasizing where labor geography may differ in its orientation.

Bryan Palmer examines the critical question of how best to deploy class analysis in working class history. For him, class is not simply an abstraction, but rather, building on the original insights of Marx and E. P. Thompson (1968); Palmer argues that while class is informed by structural determinations or *necessity*, it must be *historicized* and it must be viewed as articulated through *struggle*. Working class struggle can be contradictory and cannot be romanticized. Furthermore, because such struggles are not confined to the point of production and nor are they exclusively about class, they must also engage with feminist and other perspectives emphasizing difference. This then is a dynamic perspective on class. Yet most radically of all, Palmer (page 13) argues that even given the defeats and disappointments suffered by the working class over its history, we need to “keep the politics of alternative possibility alive in our interpretations”.

Palmer’s arguments speak compellingly to my own sub-discipline of labor geography. Like labor history, labor geography took inspiration from Thompson’s approach to class and worker struggles. Indeed, in compliment to Palmer’s urging for us to always historicize, labor geographers would add the necessity of radical scholars to “spatialize”. In other words, the landscape of capitalism is not simply a container of class struggle, but as brilliantly revealed by the early labor geography scholarship of Herod (1997) and Mitchell (1996), it is both active in and shaped by, workers’ agency. Labor’s struggles can be either particularistic or solidaristic, but they are always deeply imbricated in capitalism’s uneven development. This was recognized by Marx himself, perhaps most notably in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, and *The Civil War in France* in which the radical consciousness of urban and especially Parisian workers was

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contrasted to more conservative rural workers and peasants (Harvey 2006). These conflicts also spoke to what labor geographers have argued is labor's need to "scale up" struggles by building upon and transcending the local to the national and international scales (Herod 2001). This process includes creating both scalar hierarchies via unions and political parties and networks through solidarity and other campaigns (Cumbers et al. 2008). Thus like Palmer, labor geographers have emphasized class as a struggle-defined process, yet one that is *both* temporal and geographic.

Like labor history, labor geography has become increasingly pluralistic in approach with an increasing engagement with feminist and more post-structural scholarship. In this process, the role of the formal workplace and with it, the wage relation, and the class more generally have been problematized by critiques of abstraction, essentialism, and the relative neglect of social reproduction in both Marxism and in Marx's oeuvre itself (see Katz 2001; Rioux 2015; McDowell 2016). These perspectives emphasize the intersectionality of class with gender and race and other forms of difference, arguing that the latter just as distinctively characterize capitalism as does class (Smith 2016). Thus Wills (2008 308) argues, "class *can* [still] be an important axis of identity and political organization but it is not *necessarily* so." As such, the project for many labor geographers moved from a "critique of capitalism from the *standpoint* of labour.... [to a] *critique of labour within capitalism*" (Castree 1999, 149 author's emphasis).

The adoption of feminist and more post-structural perspectives has also been accompanied by labor geographers examining how the restructuring of capitalism via outsourcing, and the rise of digital platforms has blurred formal and informal sites of wage work, including tasks within the sphere of social reproduction. In this context, emphasis has been placed on non-workplace focused and more networked forms of social or community unionism, especially as they related to struggles by women or workers of color (Tufts 2006; Wills 2001, 2008). Critically, these perspectives have increasingly recognized the importance non-trade union forms of labor struggles especially by workers in the Global South (see Rogaly 2009; Buckley 2013).

Labor geography's increasing pluralism has been a necessary and fruitful one, but like Palmer, some labor geographers have also raised questions concerning its central arguments. Thus while labor geography has opened to wider range of agents, spaces and theoretical perspectives, some such as McDowell (2008), have wondered if a focus on difference has come at the expense of recognizing the commonalities of exploitation and restructuring confronting all workers. Thus the issue of the relationship of difference and social reproduction to class and the broader structure of capitalism remains a very difficult one. Thus McDowell (2016) points to increasing class divisions amongst women and other identities as many tasks in social reproduction become commodified. She has also noted that feminist labor geographers have engaged much more with the more micro-oriented, performativity approaches of Judith Butler than the more structural and Marxian-rooted analyses of social reproduction by scholars such as Nancy Fraser. As Smith (2016) has admitted in part because of this orientation, "there is no feminist theorization of sex-gender systems that approximates Marxism's trenchant theorization of capitalism and class exploitation."

Other labor geographers like Mann (2007), Rutherford (2010), and Das (2012) argue that the demotion of class in recent scholarship to just one more intersecting identity, or the view that the workplace lacks any causality in class formation (see Livingston and Scholtz 2016 regarding the social sciences more generally) has weakened labor geography's analytical purchase and focus. Indeed, while there has been a revival of interest in class in labor geography, it has been more focused on the esthetic, moral aspects of class identity (see Stenning 2008), without recognizing its necessary relationship to its structural determinants (see Sayer 2005 for a critique). Here, I agree with Palmer that dwelling on abstract class

definitions without embedding them in material struggles is problematic. However, not only can we use theory and abstraction to identify the essences of capitalism and class struggle without being essentialist, but conceptual clarity is both analytically and politically vital (see Hodgson 2016). This said, the material reality of the relationship between class and gender and race and other identities is inevitably messy, but the latter identities are not separate from struggles over work and the wage relation, but rather are inherent to and constitutive of such conflicts. Furthermore, while I concur with Palmer that class struggle cannot be simply reduced to those at the point of production, some spaces are more strategic in worker struggles than others. The wage relation and the workplace remain a critical arena for labor's exploitation and the development of class consciousness (Hudson 2001, 124–141; Gough 2003). Because work under capitalism is by necessity a collective endeavor, there are always possibilities of common worker identity and resistance (Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997; Gough 2003).

Finally, I would like to end my commentary by addressing Palmer's call that "we keep the politics of alternative possibility alive" in our work and struggles. I could not concur more with this statement. Indeed, one of the most frustrating aspects of the left in contemporary social sciences and labor geography is its great reluctance to address what is/are its project(s). In part, this is a legacy of the failure of soviet communism, but also that some versions of poststructuralism refusal to endorse any projects on the grounds that they are all inevitably oppressive (Gough 2010). In its stead, many labor geographers have emphasized "justice", which has often only been only vaguely defined (see Blomley 2006). Other post-structural labor geographers such as Gibson-Graham (2006) call for an equally ill-defined "diverse postcapitalist" economies, which largely ignores both the continued salience of wage work and how workers would engage with capital and the state's power. Marx in the afterword of the second edition of German introduction to *Capital Vol. One* wisely refused to "write recipes for the cook-shops of the future" by outlining a new socialist society. Yet one of capitalism's strongest ideological pillars is precisely its claim that there is no alternative (Gindin 2014). Given the grave crises confronting workers, Chibber (2017) has recently urged that one of our most pressing tasks is to outline our vision of a future socialism while connecting it to worker's contemporary struggles. If, as Palmer reminds us, Marx's riposte to Feuerbach was on the necessity to change the world and not just to interpret it, should not illuminating this vision also be a vital project?

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Ethical statement** This article complied with ethical standards. It received no funding, there are no conflicts of interest, and it was not based on interviews or research with human subjects; it did not require ethical approval or informed consent.

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